



URBAN NATURE PLANS +

Introduction to reflexive
monitoring for urban
nature plans





Reflexive monitoring for urban nature plans

*This short brief is an introduction to **reflexive monitoring** as an evaluation method that offers insight on progress of projects in real time, supporting urban practitioners and professionals to evaluate day-to-day activities while considering the bigger picture.*

Key messages:

1. Reflexive monitoring (RM) is an evaluation method that offers insight into the progress of projects, supporting urban practitioners and professionals evaluate the day-to-day activities of their projects in real time while also considering broader strategic priorities.
2. RM encourages proactive problem-solving; by taking the local context into account, RM explores the complexity of urban projects, identifies the key issues and further breaks them down into learning questions.
3. The RM cycle comprises 6 steps: 1. Rethink goals; 2. Identify Project Team roles; 3. Record; 4. Analyze; 5. Communicate; and 6. Reflect. Instrumental to the overall effectiveness of the process, is the shaping and framing RM to the project, rather than the other way around.
5. A Dynamic Learning Agenda (DLA) is a tool to record and trace the reflexive learning process. The goal of the DLA is to link long-term goals of a project to learning objectives and concrete-short term actions.
6. Over time, as cities work with their DLA and reflect on the actions, a series of learning outcomes will emerge, helping to identify good practices that can be shared, as part of a peer-to-peer learning process.



Reflexive monitoring (RM) is an evaluation method that offers insight into the progress of projects, supporting urban practitioners and professionals evaluate the day-to-day activities of their projects in real time while also considering broader strategic priorities. In the context of the UNPplus project, RM is one of three knowledge co-creation and learning modes (learning-by-doing, learning-by-interacting and reflexive learning) through which partners co-create and generate knowledge towards effective implementation of Urban Nature Plans (UNPs). Furthermore, these learning modes are aligned with three scaling mechanisms (scaling-up, scaling-out and scaling deep). This short brief shares insights and lessons learned from the UNPplus project – on reflexive monitoring, dynamic learning agendas and scaling mechanisms.

I. Reflexive Monitoring Process

UNPs are a framework, which can be understood as an adaptive management process, a planning process, and a concrete plan in itself. Implemented at large-scale, and addressing multiple complex and inter-related challenges, UNPs require cross-departmental collaboration, and valorisation of policy learning that relate to multiple strategic agendas of the city simultaneously. UNPs require a collaborative approach to bring to action tacit and experiential knowledge.

Taking these aspects into account, RM is an evaluation method that offers insight on progress of projects in real time (Mierlo et al, 2010). By drawing together different perspectives and expertise, RM is a collaborative process that enables the identification of barriers which are then reflected upon by cities and reframed into opportunities (Lodder, et al, 2020); as a process, RM provides means to capture learnings and translate them into actions.

RM encourages proactive problem-solving; more importantly for urban projects, RM takes the local context into account, exploring the complexity of the issue and breaking it down into learning questions. Over time, the context-specific framing promoted by RM leads to more effective and relevant solutions.

“Sometimes the most valuable outcome is not a finished project, but improved communication between the people who make it happen.”

- Adrián Cabezas of Barcelona, Spain

Reflexive Monitoring: The six-step process

A six-step procedure underpins the RM process. The process is supported by a set of RM tools, each linked to specific steps in the overall process, which may be applied by urban practitioners. See Table I below.



Table 1: Description of the six-step reflexive monitoring process and application in UNP+

Step	Description
1. Rethink Goals	In RM, it is important to continually re-question, and if needed redefine goals.
	Application in UNPplus: Central to this step is consideration of how current goals of UNP need to be updated or adjusted. As part of this step, cities reflect on the main learning questions that will help them achieve their goals, as well as some of the barriers, skills gaps, and challenges that are hindering them.
2. Identify Roles	The focus of this step is identifying a RM lead, to manage the overall process. The RM lead could be a one person, or a shared responsibility of a broader group.
	Application in UNPplus: Establishing a RM group, comprised of individuals representing different departments can contribute to breaking down silos, thereby reinforcing and strengthening inter-departmental collaboration underpinning UNP implementation.
3. Record	In this step, the focus is on recording important events and analysing critical turning points. This comprises the following aspects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tracking important events – identifying and agreeing on a time when the UNP team (including those responsible for managing the RM process) will meet to discuss events and identify critical turning points, as captured in the dynamic learning agenda (DLA). • updating the DLA – confirming and sticking to a timeline for updating the DLA, as well as the individuals involved in managing the updates, including how broadly they are shared. • keeping track of follow-up actions: monitoring progress and capturing learning outcomes across the DLA over time.
	Application in UNPplus: There are a number of tools that can support effective and timely recording of progress, including creating a timeline of events, and establishing the DLA. The DLA, as a key tool for supporting cities with their UNPs is discussed in more detailed below.
4. Analyse	This step involves participating in ‘learning sessions’ to identify learning outcomes. The objectives of the learning sessions are two-fold: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • get a better understanding of how to ‘do’ reflexive monitoring; and, • abstract and analyse the learning outcomes of the team. In practical terms this means that during a learning session, each newly added item on the DLA is thoroughly considered, i.e., the critical turning points and learning questions are discussed and if needed reformulated to increase their reflexivity.
	Application in UNPplus: the learning sessions have been incorporated as the central structuring mechanism of the Reflection Labs (these are discussed in more detail in Figure 1); however, each of the UNPplus cities can also organize additional learning sessions within their organizations, in order to further embed the reflexive monitoring process as part of their day-to-day work.



Step	Description
5. Communicate	This step in the RM cycle focusses on sharing and communicating the lessons learned (both in the application of the RM process itself) as well as key learning outcomes specific to the project (in this case, the city UNPs) the RM process is being applied to over time.
	Application in UNPplus: In the UNPplus project, there are a number of ways in which the lessons are communicated and shared. This is depicted in the Figure 1.
6. Reflect	Building on the previous step, in Step 6 sessions can be organised to reflect upon the effectiveness of the reflexive monitoring method itself and compare and share the learning outcomes. These sessions give practitioners the chance to share their experience of working through the various steps and using the tools of the method, which may in turn be adapted based on the feedback received or changing needs.
	Application in UNPplus: This step can facilitate a peer-to-peer process between the cities and their experiences of establishing and implementing a UNP, framed by the DLA – namely, a shared discussion of key critical turning points, learning objectives, and learning outcomes. In the UNP project, this aspect of the process has been operationalized via the Urban Nature Exchanges – the key mechanism to support city-to-city exchange. Furthermore, over time, the project will assess the extent to which RM practices changed organizational approaches (i.e. scaling deep).



Photo: Reflexive monitoring session between cities in Paris, during a UNPplus meeting in March 2025.

2. Dynamic Learning Agenda

DLA is a tool to record and trace the reflexive learning process. The goal of the DLA is to link long-term goals of a project, in this case the city UNPs to learning objectives and concrete short term actions. Over time, as the cities implement and reflect on the actions, a series of



learning outcomes will emerge, identifying good practices that can be shared, as part of a peer-to-peer learning process. Table 2 below describes each of the elements of the DLA.

Table 2: Elements of the dynamic learning agenda

DLA Element	Description
Critical Turning Points (CTPs)	Important moments where something changes that helps or hinders the realization of a project. CTPs can help the UNP city teams to generate questions, to underpin the identification of learning objectives.
Learning Objectives	What do the cities need to learn to address a barrier or opportunity as identified in the critical turning point - in a way that the higher-level goals of UNP are addressed?
Follow-up Actions	Short-term activities that are implemented framed by the learning objectives, in order to leverage or address the CTPs.
Learning Outcomes	Innovative ways the team handles the barriers or opportunities that can be shared between and among cities, as part of a peer-to-peer learning process.

In UNPplus, the DLA helps frame the reflection lab discussions, where critical turning points and learning objectives are considered in more detail, leading to a better understanding of the technical support required by the cities. Furthermore, significant learning outcomes can be shared to frame relevant peer-to-peer exchanges, i.e. Urban Nature Exchanges (see below for a short description). Over time, the RM process will contribute to the generation of knowledge, across three key scaling mechanisms outlined by UNPplus.

“Reflexive Monitoring is the engine for systemic change... don’t only include the departments that work directly on nature. Bring in economic development, citizen engagement, education... It changes the conversation”.

- Frida Brett-Smith of Mannheim, Germany

3. Generating Knowledge: Scaling Mechanisms

The inter- and trans-disciplinary knowledge co-created by the UNPplus project is underpinned and supported by 3 types of learning:



- **Learning-by-doing** stands at the core of the concrete activities carried out in the Greening cities to co-create plans, involve a relevant number of actors and stakeholders, test advanced approaches and tools, and build knowledge.
- **Learning-by-interacting** is activated at three levels: (i) interactions for knowledge co-creation and transfer among Lighthouse (Paris, Barcelona) and Greening cities (Mannheim, Belgrade, and Burgas); (ii) interactions for knowledge transfer between the partners and the city representatives, who will be the main beneficiaries of capacity building and tools after the project's lifespan; (iii) interactions among the project partners and with other projects, mission platforms and other relevant platforms and networks.
- **Reflexive learning** draws experiential learning from the learning-by-doing and by-interacting to inform the project's monitoring and assessment framework, particularly with regard to the outcomes of research and innovation activities, where outcome mapping will be adopted in combination with a log frame to draw learnings.

UNPplus employs 3 scaling mechanisms to further support and affirm the processes and activities undertaken by the cities in relation to their UNPs.

- **Scaling up** – innovative processes and tools tested in the Lighthouse Cities will be adapted, tested, and improved in the Greening Cities.
- **Scaling out** – knowledge produced by the project will be spread to maximise its impact. Peer learning and stakeholder networks will be utilised. This will ensure broader diffusion and adoption of the project's outcomes across Europe and beyond.
- **Scaling deep** – all cities involved in UNPplus will develop new capacities by adopting fresh mindsets and diverse working methods. This will lead to organizational transformation. RM will be applied to monitor this transformation to better understand how to manage change and integrate new mindsets and practices.



Photo: Reflexive monitoring session between cities in Burgas, during UNE meeting June 2025.

Figure I draws together the key knowledge generating and sharing mechanisms that are part of the UNPplus project. Reflexive Monitoring acts as a 'spine' for communicating and sharing knowledge between the cities and other project partners.

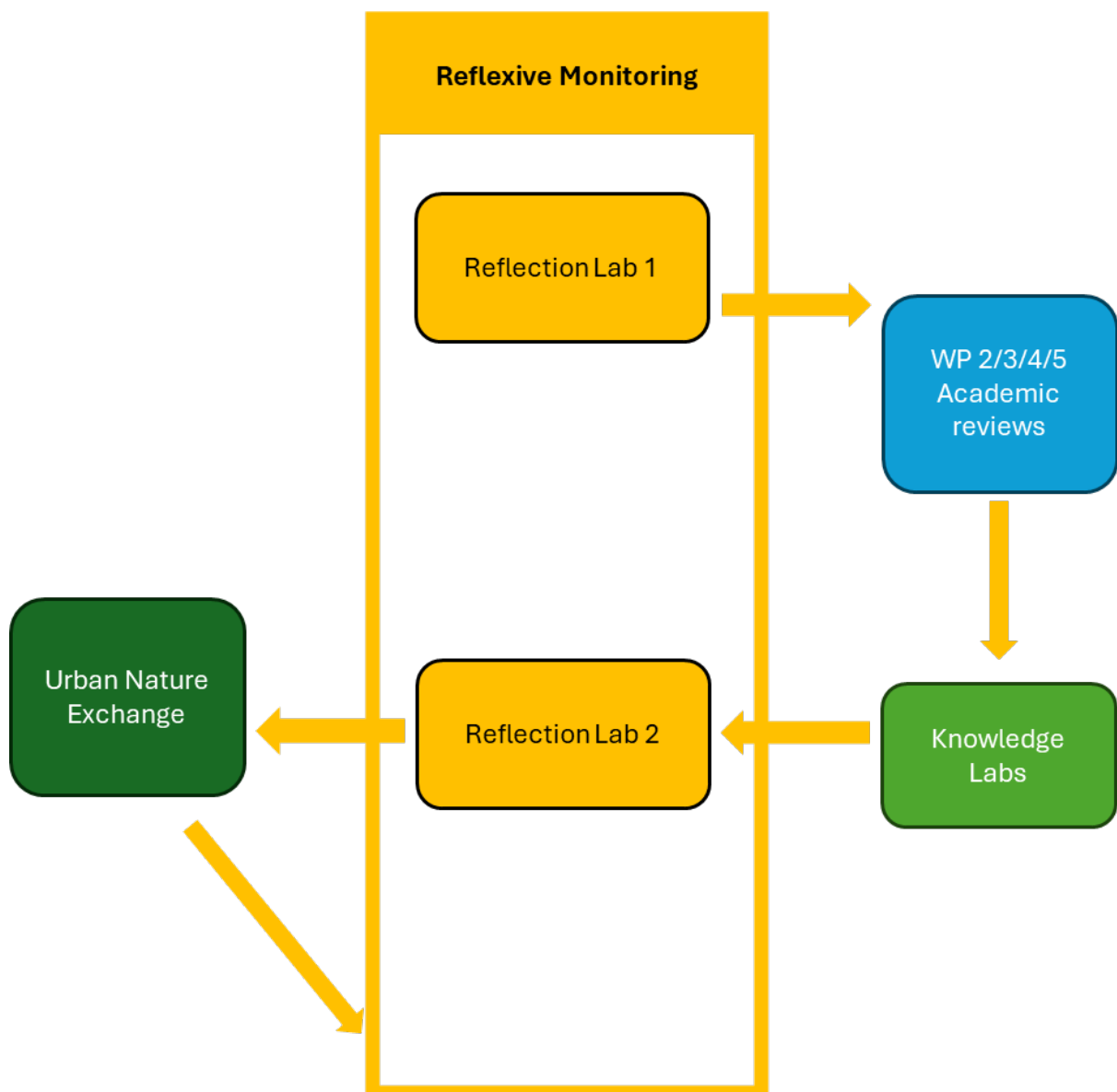
- **Reflection Labs** (i.e. Learning Sessions – Step 4): Cities discuss their Reflexive Monitoring learning with mentors, reflecting on where they have the greatest



challenges and where they require the most support. This information is captured and transferred to the next step.

- **Academic Reviews:** Knowledge is transferred from city experiences through the reflection labs to the UNP+ activities, informing, supporting, and iteratively strengthening the science, knowledge and practice reviews.
- **Knowledge Labs:** Academics share with cities best practices and science from science, knowledge and practice reviews.
- **Urban Nature Exchanges (i.e. sharing learning – Step 6):** Peer-to-peer learning between cities. This will focus on topics where cities need support and where cities can offer their experiences from a UNP step.

Figure 1: Key knowledge generating and sharing mechanisms in the UNPplus project





4. Recommendations

Focus on the **local context** and apply reflexive monitoring to a project, rather than framing a project around reflexive monitoring, to ensure its benefits last beyond the life of the project.

Identify and build a **cross-departmental working team** to foster collaboration and establish a reflexive monitoring culture, especially when working on projects that require a wide breadth of input, knowledge, and expertise to achieve results.

Apply reflexive monitoring tools, such as the **dynamic learning agenda**, to help track progress. The dynamic learning agenda supports teams in the early identification of critical turning points, and how to address them via considered and context-specific learning objectives.

Use **insights from reflection** to address barriers and seize opportunities, making necessary adjustments, in real-time; reflexivity requires adaptability and flexibility to leverage and translate new knowledge for both short and long-term project impact.

Create space (as part of regular reflexive monitoring meetings) to discuss events, identify new and evolving critical turning points, and collectively formulate new learning questions and actions. Bear in mind the **need for challenging conversations** by questioning established viewpoints to encourage new perspectives, learning objectives, and shift narratives.

Establish effective communication channels in order to **share and disseminate learnings** to enhance and maximize impact of the learning outcomes generated via the reflexive monitoring process. Strong communication channels will also reinforce the cross-departmental working structure required to underpin reflexive monitoring.



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